

23.

CRITICAL ESSAY

ON THE

EPIGONIAD;

of the Reverend Mr. Buchanan

WHEREIN

The AUTHOR'S horrid Abuse of MILTON

IS EXAMINED

Hoc tantum admonentes, ut Loripidem rectius dividat, Æthiopem alios.

BUCHANAN

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EPIGONIAD.

AS I have received the highest pleasure in reading MILTON, I cannot but think myself bound, in gratitude, to defend him for once, when he is openly misrepresented and vilified.

A GENTLEMAN of this country has, within these few months, published a romance in rhymes, which he calls an epic poem, and has given it the name of *Epigoniad*. In his preface he brings a two-fold charge against MILTON: 1st, "That *Paradise Lost* is a work altogether irregular; that the subject of it is not epic, but tragic; and that Adam and Eve are not designed to be objects of admiration, but of pity." 2dly, "The author of *Paradise Lost* is justly chargeable with impiety, has offended notoriously in this respect, for presuming to represent the Divine Nature, and the mysteries of religion, according to the narrowness of human prejudice." This author owns, or rather says, "No encomiums are too great for him as a poet." Behold how he labours to undermine this by the first charge! a charge which, granted

lays the fairest of MILTON's laurels in the dust; that he could not write a regular piece; and when he designed an epic ‡, he blundered (to use a Scoticism of our author's) so wide of the mark, that the work "is not epic, but tragic."

MR ADDISON, one of the greatest of critics, not second to Longinus himself, tells us, he has *shewn* that the *Paradise Lost* is perfectly regular and epic, in the construction of the fable, the episodes, machinery, &c. yet, O heavens! how this author talks; "Irregular! not epic! Adam and Eve are not designed as objects of admiration!" This makes me almost think our author never read *Paradise Lost*: surely purity and warmth of affection are not only objects of admiration, but what we ought carefully to imitate. Adam says of Eve,

————— To the nuptial bow'r
I led her blushing like the morn; —

————— Yet, when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems,
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best.

And when Adam and the angel are in discourse, she goes off,

Yet went she not, as not with such discourse
Delighted, or not capable her ear
Of what was high; such pleasure she reserv'd
Adam relating, she sole auditress.
Her husband, the relator, she prefer'd
Before the angel, and of him to ask
Chose rather: he, she knew, would intermix
Grateful digressions, and solve high dispute
With conjugal caresses.

Is not such a beautiful picture of the height of human felicity, in all respects, as much an object of admiration as the

‡ MILTON tells us, he designed it an epic at the beginning of the ninth book, where, he says, his subject was more heroic or epic than either Homer's or Virgil's.

rage or courage of Achilles ; and a thousand times more so than any of the characters of the *Epigoniad* ? But why did I say characters ? there is no such thing in the whole piece, excepting the hero Diomed's. Theseus, the king of men, Idomen, Clearchus, Agamemnon, Menelaus, the two Ajaxs, Merion, and Hegialus, are no ways distinguished by their passions or actions : Diomed, the hero, indeed has a character supposed, but then it is that of a downright madman, who, as our author says,

— by passion sway'd,
The chiefs, the army, and himself, betray'd ;

with his own hand murders his father's intimate friend, and his own faithful guardian, Deiphobus, for nothing but giving him good advice, with a fatherly care ; and afterwards, is so nigh murdering his next best friend, Ulysses, that a god must appear to save him. Now, in the name of wonder ! is this mad fellow an object of admiration ? sure I am he is an object of detestation. To keep up the Homeric character of Ulysses, our author makes him some times give the best advice, but he has abominably spoiled it, by putting the most ungenerous and unheroic sentiments in his mouth, bidding the hero kill a supplicant captive woman.

See how the immortals, by a just decree,
Cassandra's fall avenge, and honour thee :
See, at thy feet, the wife of Creon laid,
A victim offer'd for the injur'd maid ;
Let her, the first, your just resentment feel,
By heav'n presented to your vengeful steel.

"MILTON's poem is irregular !" but where is our author's regularity, when all must stop till the long winded story of the death of Hercules be minutely told, which, with other such foreign circumstances, take up the whole seventh book ? Nor is the so often sung death of Hercules any way connec-

ted with the plot, further than that Deinices could not obtain the arrows of Hercules to defend Thebes, which might have been told in one couplet, that he returned without them. And where is our author's regularity, when his hero is stripped of Pallas's arms by Mercury in the middle of the battle, and, to bring it about, the hero must fall asleep?

Behind Tydides in the fight he stay'd,
And on his head the potent sceptre laid,
Whose magic pow'r on waking sense prevails:
Subdu'd the hero, steep'd by pow'rful charms,
Till Hermes stript him of the immortal arms.

O wonderful! this is so far from being regular, that, though done by a god, is absurd to the last degree.

"MILTON's subject is tragic!" I believe there was never a romance written, that was so tragic in the plot as this *Epigoniad*. The hero's murdering his faithful guardian, and the love-intrigues in it, give it greatly the air of a modern tragedy; but the catastrophe is perfectly tragic, and noways epic. Creon's murdering the fair object of Diomed's love, in the last book, is quite against the epic laws, that demand a happy catastrophe: but this unlucky event, for which there was no necessity, makes it set in as dark a gloom as the most melancholy tragedy; and is just the same as if Virgil had made some soldier, at the end of his *Divine poem*, shake before the eyes of Æneas the bloody head of his dear Lavinia. What would all his conquests avail, when the blood of the object in the possession of whom he alone expected his happiness?

Smok'd indignant on a ruffian's blade †?

* Or, as Diomed says of Cassandra,

— To me more dear than all the world contains,

‡ Young.

To come to the second charge, That it is impious to bring the true GOD into an epic poem ; " that (to use our author's words) it must be highly offensive to all such as have just impressions of religion : " I should readily grant him all this, were epic poetry no grander a thing than his romance ; but I always thought the epic was the species of poetry that required the utmost grandeur and dignity : when it is really such, why not introduce the true GOD ? where shall we speak of him, if not in a performance that requires the utmost elevation and solemnity ? " MILTON (he says) has presumed to represent the Divine Nature according to the narrowness of human prejudice, has employed a Being of infinite wisdom, in discussing the subtilties of school divinity." I cannot read this passage without horror. MILTON, as Addison observes, has an awe upon him when he makes the Almighty speak ; he forgets the decorations of poetry, and intirely confines himself to expressions of Scripture and the early fathers. And must the doctrine of the Scriptures be called the narrowness of human prejudice, without one sentence brought to prove it ? And so far is MILTON from school subtilties, that, as Addison too observes, he handles the doctrine of grace and free-will with the greatest perspicuity ; and Addison adds, Were it not for the length he would transcribe the whole passage ; it so pleased the fine taste of one of the greatest and purest of writers. There was an absolute necessity MILTON should bring in the Almighty pronouncing man a free agent ; the whole of the poem turns upon it, and it was absolutely necessary to make good what he proposed,

To vindicate the ways of God to man.

The genius of a MILTON could never embrace the absurd doctrine of necessity, could never, as a late author has done, affirm that our actions are so necessary as to admit the very possibility of none other, that GOD is author of this necess-

sity, yet not the author of sin, because the intention of the sinner is different from that of GOD. But how, in the name of wonder, can the sinner have any other intention than what GOD necessitates him to have so strongly as to admit of the bare possibility of none other! Had MILTON gone upon the absurd and horrible scheme of necessity, and undertaken the vindication of GOD by such despicable evasions and school subtilties as these, probably we should have heard nothing of MILTON's impiety from our author.

I CANNOT pass over another great name our author has also attacked. "The quaintness (says he) of Mr Pope's expression, in his translation of the Iliad and Odyssey, is not at all suitable either to the antiquity or majestic gravity of his author, and contributes more to make his fable appear VAIN AND ABSURD, than any circumstance that seems of so little moment could easily be supposed to do." Very well! Pope makes Homer appear vain and absurd. This author hits exactly in with the taste and genius of the gentlemen of the Dunciad; nay, one would almost think he had stole it from one of them, who is recorded to have written, that Pope had burlesqu'd Homer. "The quaintness of Pope's expression!" Quaintness, with no propriety, can be applied to grand, lofty, elegant diction, such as Pope's. Quaint signifies what Addison calls mixt wit; and Cowley is full of it. In short, quaint is whatever is affected. Now, there is not one English poet, nay, perhaps, not one poet of whatever language, whose works are freer of quaintness of expression than Mr Pope's. But I shall produce several quaint expressions from our author, for all his pretences to purity of stile. Let the first be the title he gives Theseus, and which has so tickled him, that it occurs about forty times in his romance;

The king of men.

a despicable puerility; a phrase very common in the mouths

of nurses, and fit for no higher place. *In act to rise,—in act to flow.*—This is highly affected, and used with such variations about six or seven times in the Vth book. When Idomen shoots for a prize,

The stiff bow crack'd, the twanging cordage sung.

When Ulysses shoots ;

The bow he strain'd, the starting arrow sung.

And when Merion shoots ;

The tough bow crack'd, the twanging cordage sung ;

Her baleful note the boding screech-owl sung.

A storm of arrows flies

Around the chief ; on every side they sing.

Besides the quaint expression in the last line, it has also the same kind of fault Ovid has been so often blamed for, for writing,

Omnia pontus erat, deerant quoque littora ponto.

But if we mix with them the *seeds* of fire,

The king of men, to meet the tempest, *fires*

His wavering bands, and valour thus inspires.

Gods ! shall one fatal hour——

The genteel oath here, and in

Gods ! that our armies e'er should need to fear,

has quite too much of the modern cast, and wants the air of antiquity our author is so fond of. *Fires his wavering bands*, is a very quaint metaphor. These, and many more quaint expressions of our author, are far below the genius of a Pope ; and, however he admires them, as he shews he does, by repeating some of them so constantly, they are in themselves ridiculous and despicable.

THERE are several other absurdities in this romance, a few of which I shall notice, and be done.

OUR author ought by no means to have slain Leophron, the Theban hero (whose character is a miserable copy of that of Hector) at the beginning, but kept it to the end. In the first battle there is almost nothing related but about the Spartans, who are neither the troops of the king of men, nor of Diomed, the hero of the poem. In the fifth book, Idomen, Ulysses, Clearchus, and Menelaus, are candidates for a prize to be gained by the best swimmer; and we are told, had it not been for one of his surly fits, the hero would have been a candidate too, and would have gained. This by no means derogates from the Epigoniad, Idomen and Ulysses; but such a game, fitter for the heroes of the Dunciad than those of a serious poem, would terribly degrade Homer's Ulysses, Idomen and Diomed. During the swimming Minerva descends to tell Ulysses not to swim so fast, but to let Idomen gain, which he does. Is not the indispensable rule of Horace notoriously broken here?

*Nec Deus Interfit nisi dignus vindice nodus
Inciderit.*

THERE is nothing more unworthy the epic poem than punning. Addison condemns MILTON for representing the devils as mocking the angels on the confusion their engines bred among them in the second day's battle, and even scruples at,

—————The small infantry
Warr'd on by cranes,—————

How much more does our author deserve censure, who so waggishly plays off a whole string of puns? Menelaus, at the swimming, was like to drown, and a shepherd swain saves him:

Upon a willow's trunk Theseites sat,
 He saw Atrides safe, and thus aloud,
 With leer malign, address'd the list'ning croud :
 Here, on the flow'ry turf, a hearth shall stand,
 A hecatomb the sav'ring gods demand,
 Who sav'd Atrides in this dire debate,
 And snatch'd the hero from the jaws of fate.
 Without his aid we all might quit the field,
 Ulysses, Ajax, and Tydides, yield :
 His mighty arm alone the host defends,
 But dire disaster still the chief attends.
 Last sun beheld him vanquish'd on the plain,
 Then warriors sav'd him, now a shepherd swain.
 Defend him still from persecuting fate,
 Protect the hero who protects the state ;
 Guard him amidst the dangers of the war,
 And, when he swims, let aid be never far.

And, to carry the jest higher, Theseites, poor dog ! falls from
 his willow plump into the pool : and, to carry it higher yet,

A load of soil comes thund'ring on on his head.

Thus, as Pope says,

And gentle dulness ever loves a joke.

In the fourth book there is a truce made for seven days,
 during which time the heroine, Cassandra, is kidnapped, and
 taken into Thebes. On condition that Creon, king of Thebes,
 does not kill her, but deliver her safe to Diomed, Diomed is
 not to partake of the counsels or works of the Greeks for
 twenty days. During the truce, while the Greeks were bu-
 rying their dead, Creon treacherously attacks them, and, at
 the entreaty of Ulysses, Diomed breaks his promise, and
 repels the Thebans with all the valour of a Drawcansir in
 the Rehearsal, whereon Creon kills Cassandra ; but just two
 or three minutes before her death, Laodice, Creon's wife,
 tells her to comfort her ;

For nine short days your freedom will restore,

Thus eleven of the twenty are past, but yet the seven days truce not done, which commenced before Diomed's promise: the truce is not done; for in the mean time Cassandra is killed Laodice is looking at the battle that, we are told, treacherously broke the truce, by attacking the Greeks when burying their slain.

A GRIEVOUS blunder this indeed! but the taking of Thebes surprises me most of all: Diomed and Ulysses get into Thebes without any difficulty! this is like Ulysses's wife counsels; a fore reflection on the parts of the other chiefs, how they could overlook so easy an advantage.

Let us to mount the ramparts straight proceed,
And they themselves will follow as we lead.
Ulysses thus; and springing from the ground,
Both chiefs at once ascend the lofty mound.

Good leapers in troth!

Before him each his shining buckler bears,
'Gainst flying darts, and thick portended spears.
Now on the bulwark's level top they stand.

So in a little the poem concludes without mentioning a particular duel with Creon: a sad oversight indeed!

THE moral of this piece is sadly maimed. It is, that the gods will punish treachery; yet Diomed, the hero's treachery goes Scot-free. Bossu says, *La fin du poëme epique est de donner instructions morales*, &c. The design of the epic poem is to give moral instructions, to all sorts of people in general and in particular. All who have read our author, will readily grant he has paid little respect to Bossu's rule. Addison lays it down as an indispensable rule, that the subject ought to concern the people for whom the epic is wrote. It was this made the Greeks and Romans look on their Homer and Virgil as sacred authors: and MILTON'S poem

concerns all mankind. But our author's — No, I shall let Addison speak; "Valerius Flaccus, and Statius, who were both Romans, might be justly derided, for having chosen the expedition of the Golden Eleece, and the Wars of Thebes, for the subject of their epic writings." Surely the author of an Addison will prevail with the ingenious.

ACCORDING to the example of Homer, our author makes Mercury repeat a message just in Jove's words. He has a few similies, one of a lion enraged, one of an angry wolf, one of a ship on the coast, and one of a wood burning; which are indeed the best things in the whole work, had he the discretion to use them only once: but, not after the example of Homer, or any good author, he uses them on all occasions, sometimes with little, and, sometimes with no alteration at all;

As mariners with joy the sun descry
Ascending in his course the eastern sky;
Who all night long by angry tempests tost,
Shunn'd with incessant toil some faithless coast:
So to his wishing friends Atrides came,
Their danger such before, their joy the same.

As when the sun ascends with gladsome ray,
To light the weary traveller on his way,
Or cheer the mariner by tempest tost,
Amid the dangers of some per'ous coast;
So to his wishing friends Tydides came,
Their danger such before, their joy the same.

As fire with wasteful conflagration spreads,
And kindles in its course the woodland shades;

As fire, when kindled on some mountain head,
Where runs in long extent some woodland shade.

As the shepherd swains avoid a lion's ire,
 is a simile always at hand, and sometimes a little varied, as
 the flocks defend themselves from a lion's ire;
 sometimes not varied at all, is used about twenty times.

When a hero comes to the fight he never fails to tell us,

— he rais'd his voice

Loud as the silver trumpet's martial noise.

He has innumerable other lines and similes that he can never get repeated enough. All I shall say of such a method is, it looks too like the product of a barren soil.

As warriors with joy the sun delay
 Ascending in his course the eastern sky;
 So all night long the warriors
 Struggled with inextinguishable fire;
 So to his willing friends the sun came,
 Their danger such before, their joy the same.

As when the sun ascends with gladsome ray,
 To light the weary traveller on his way,
 Or cheer the mariner by tempest roll;
 Amid the Sirens' song, the Nymphs call;
 So to his willing friends the sun came,
 Their danger such before, their joy the same.

As the wild western congregation
 And kindles in its course the woodland shades;
 As the, when kindled on some mountain peak,
 Where runs in long extent some woodland shade.